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## **A stick which may be grabbed by either end: Sino-Hellenic studies as a token of comparative philosophy**

Weber, Ralph

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## A Stick Which may be Grabbed on Either Side: Sino-Hellenic Studies in the Mirror of Comparative Philosophy

Ralph Weber

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**Abstract** Recently, Jeremy Tanner has published a highly informative review article in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, in which he introduces and advertises “Sino-Hellenic Studies” as a new and upcoming subfield in academic inquiry. Tanner particularly focuses on what he terms “Sino-Hellenic comparative philosophy,” while developing his perspective clearly from within contemporary Classicists’ academic parameters. In this paper, I approach the matter precisely from the other end, i.e. from within contemporary comparative philosophy, distinguishing four different approaches in comparative philosophy, pointing out some pitfalls in comparison and offering a perhaps provocative conclusion by provincializing and politicizing “Sino-Hellenic Studies”. The paper not only seeks to supplement Tanner’s review, but also and more importantly to introduce some fundamental methodological problems to be dealt with in any comparative inquiry.

**Keywords** Sino-Hellenic Studies · Comparative philosophy · Pitfalls of comparison · Jeremy Tanner

*Die römische Geschichte ist oft [...] mit anderen weltgeschichtlichen Auseinandersetzungen und Situationen verglichen worden. Solche Vergleiche und Parallelen können sehr lehrreich sein, aber sie führen auch oft zu merkwürdigen Widersprüchen. Das englische Weltreich z.B. wird bald mit Karthago, bald aber mit Rom in eine Parallele gesetzt. Derartige Vergleiche sind meistens ein Stock mit zwei Enden, den man an jeder Seite anfassen und umkehren kann.*<sup>1</sup>

– Carl Schmitt, *Land und Meer* (1942), p. 18

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<sup>1</sup> “[...], Roman history has often been used as term of comparison with other conflicts and events in world history. Although quite interesting at times, such comparisons may leave room for strange inconsistencies as well. In this way, the British Empire is at times compared to Rome and at other times, with Carthage. Generally speaking, such comparisons are like a stick which may be grabbed by either end.” (trans. Simona Draghici)

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*Comparer, c'est d'abord mettre en perspective, et il faut y insister, qu'on me le pardonne, en se mettant soi-même en perspective.*<sup>2</sup>

– Marcel Detienne, *Comparer l'incomparable* (2000), p. 111

In a highly instructive review article published in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* in 2009, Jeremy Tanner introduces “Sino-Hellenic Studies” as a new and upcoming sub-field in academic inquiry. He ends his review by expressing the possibility that this “will become one of the most stimulating disciplinary sub-fields within both Classics and Sinology.”<sup>3</sup> In a more recent review on an edited volume discussing comparisons of Rome and China, Tanner reaffirms his confidence in the matter, asserting that “comparative studies of Greece and China have, over the last decade or so, acquired sufficient weight and momentum to constitute a specific interdisciplinary sub-field (Sino-Hellenic Studies).”<sup>4</sup> Still more recently, these assertions have met support by Alexander Beecroft, who finds Tanner’s review article “already in need of updating.”<sup>5</sup>

Whatever it might take for an academic sub-field rightfully to be considered as constituted, it seems fair to suggest that there is something going on in Classics departments (or with Classicists working in other departments) of interest to those in the field of Chinese and comparative philosophy. In that field, explicit and implicit comparisons with Greece have been customary for long, while many today have come to consider them as part of the problem rather than of the way forward. David Hall and Roger Ames, for instance, have argued repeatedly that, when investigating “Chinese culture,” Greek philosophical vocabulary is part of the “useless lumber” that Dewey saw blocking “our highways of thought” and that Hall and Ames see as impeding “the development of comparative philosophy.”<sup>6</sup> Sino-Hellenic Studies evidently comprises comparative work in many different areas, for example, medicine, science or poetry; philosophy hence being merely one area among many. Some comparative issues arise across these areas; others are more particularly confined to philosophy. Tanner, in his earlier review uses the notion “Sino-Hellenic philosophy”

<sup>2</sup> “Comparing, that means first of all putting into perspective, and it must be insisted upon, that I be forgiven, by putting into perspective oneself.” (my translation)

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Tanner, “Ancient Greece, Early China: Sino-Hellenic Studies and Comparative Approaches to the Classical World: A Review Article” in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 129 (2009): 105.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Tanner, “Review of Fritz-Heiner Mutschler and Achim Mittag (eds.), *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, XX + 481 pp.” in *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 18, no. 2 (2011): 303.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Jamieson Beecroft, “Review of Hyun Jin Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China*, London: Gerald Duckworth, 2009, VI + 217 pp.” in *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 18, no. 4 (2011): 606.

<sup>6</sup> David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998, xvii. The quote by Dewey is connected to the current subject and worthwhile to be given here at some length: “In any case, I think it shows a deplorable deadness of imagination to suppose that philosophy will indefinitely revolve within the scope of the problems and systems that two thousand years of European history have bequeathed to us. Seen in the long perspective of the future, the whole of western European history is a provincial episode. I do not expect to see in my day a genuine, as distinct from a forced and artificial, integration of thought. But a mind that is not too egotistically impatient can have faith that this unification will issue in its season. Meanwhile a chief task of those who call themselves philosophers is to help get rid of the useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought, and strive to make straight and open the paths that lead to the future.” (“From Absolutism to Experimentalism” [1930])

and focuses besides science, medicine and comparative literature on philosophy, and this is also the focus I shall adopt presently. In this paper, I set out to examine some possibilities and limitations of Sino-Hellenic philosophy if viewed from the perspective of comparative philosophy. I shall proceed in three steps: distinguishing four different approaches in comparative philosophy, pointing out some (potential) pitfalls in comparison and offering a (hopefully) provocative conclusion by provincializing Sino-Hellenic Studies.

## Approaches in Comparative Philosophy

In his discussion of the philosophical strands of Sino-Hellenic Studies, Jeremy Tanner distinguishes several approaches, and mentions many of the leading voices in comparative philosophy that are in one or another way relevant to what he terms “Sino-Hellenic comparative philosophy”. Tanner’s own comparative approach to comparative approaches takes its starting-point from within contemporary Classicists’ academic parameters. In what follows, I would like to approach the matter precisely from the other end, i.e. from within contemporary comparative philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Although the two ends historically share some ground, today they operate largely independently in many regards – which is why Tanner can interpret their coming together as something new. Sino-Hellenic philosophy, from the point of view of comparative philosophy, is at most only a special case, besides, say, Sino-Indian philosophy, or African-European, Buddhist-Nyaya, German-French – or whatever is considered to be a suitable object for comparison.

Comparative philosophy, simply by virtue of being “comparative,” may be said in one way or another to involve a series of variables that may offer a heuristics of help for a discussion of different approaches in contemporary comparative philosophy. At least four such variables are distinguished in standard conceptualizations of comparisons: 1. A comparison is always done by someone; 2. At least two *relata* (*comparata*) are compared; 3. The *comparata* are compared in some respect (*tertium comparationis*); and 4. The result of a comparison is a relation between the *comparata* on the basis of the chosen respect. In short, the variables involved are the comparer, the *comparata*, the *tertium comparationis*, and the result of the comparison. The four variables are not independent from each other, and the comparer comes to occupy a central position, that is, unless the comparison is looked at merely technically as if it were irrelevant who is doing the comparison and for what purpose it is done. The paramount centrality of the comparer to the comparison is readily illustrated by the differences of approaches in comparative philosophy, differences at times so striking as to raise skepticism that the approaches in fact do at all share something in common that justifies putting them one next to the other – that is, of course, beyond a general claim of them being about comparison and being about philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of recent literature on comparison in contemporary comparative philosophy, see: Ralph Weber, “‘How to compare?’ – On the Methodological State of Comparative Philosophy” in *Philosophy Compass* (2013), forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of comparison and particularly the role of the *tertium comparationis*, see: Ralph Weber, “Comparative Philosophy and the tertium: Comparing what with what, and in what Respect?” in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* (2014), forthcoming.

As would be expected, different approaches in comparative philosophy emphasize different variables, and these emphases usually reveal something about the purposes that the comparer attaches to the comparison. Given the common practice of marking out some approaches as either “contextualist” or “decontextualist”, it seems to me utterly important to underline that *each and every* approach “contextualizes” or – better, I think – *emphasizes* one or several variables and *de-emphasizes* other variables (to the point of treating those almost as mere formalities). Out of the complex matrix that represents all possible constellations of emphasis and de-emphasis, I want briefly and exemplarily to highlight only four such constellations that seem to me mirrored in contemporary approaches in comparative philosophy:

- I. A first approach does as much as possible to de-emphasize the role of the comparer while emphasizing all *comparata* as emancipated objects to be studied in their respective historical contexts. The work of Geoffrey Lloyd perhaps exemplifies this approach best. Lloyd is methodologically most refined and of course aware that the de-emphasis of the comparer functions as an ideal only. In fact, as he writes, we are facing a dilemma, for “we cannot, on pain of distortion, impose our own conceptual framework. Yet we have to.”<sup>9</sup> What is more, Lloyd also has a declared interest in showing what we, today, can learn from the study of ancient civilizations, but his main interest – I would argue – remains first and foremost “to try to grasp how the ancient investigators themselves understood their work, their ideas, goals, and methods.”<sup>10</sup> In this, Lloyd clearly shows his affinities with Collingwood and Skinner, and stays true to his Classicist socialization (which Tanner shares with him). What distinguishes Lloyd from others is his explicit keeping a distance over and against both of his *comparata*, ancient China, but also ancient Greece, speaking in both cases of a “distance that separates antiquity from ourselves.”<sup>11</sup> As we shall see presently, the locus of “ourselves” in the constellation of variables is indeed crucial.
- II. Emphasizing the comparer as well as the one *comparatum* that is somehow considered not to be “one’s own” is a second approach. The work of Roger Ames and his different collaborators, in which the distinction between “our own tradition” (“our culture”) and the “other tradition” (“an alternative culture”) is programmatic, is a case in point.<sup>12</sup> Through his comparative method, Ames seeks to bring forth “alternative responses to problems that resist satisfactory resolution within a single culture” and he self-consciously operates from within “the perspective of the present.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, concurring with that emphasis on the comparer is the one on the “other”, as when it is declared the “ultimate aim” to arrive “at a more accurate picture of Confucius’ thinking”, at a “truer account of Confucius,” or, more broadly, to understand “Chinese philosophy”, the

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004, 2. See also pp. 8–9.

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd 2004, p. x. See also p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> Lloyd 2004, 188.

<sup>12</sup> David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, 5, 8, 14 and passim.

<sup>13</sup> Hall and Ames, 1987, 5 and 7.

“Confucian tradition” or, simply, to take “China on its own terms” or to help “rebuild the Chinese vessel with its own planks”<sup>14</sup>

- III. A third approach emphasizes again the comparer but this time together with the one *comparatum* that is somehow considered to be “one’s own”. François Jullien in my view exemplifies this approach. Of course Jullien also emphasises China, he writes: *Il y a à cette enquête un premier intérêt, qui la rend directement utile : pouvoir « décoder » la Chine.* [There is a primary interest in my study that makes it directly useful: to be able to ‘decode’ China.]<sup>15</sup> But I would be prepared to argue that Jullien’s interest in decoding China is instrumental only, that China functions as a heterotopic image in a (pseudo-)Foucauldian way and that the main emphasis in the approach is put on that for which China is the other.<sup>16</sup> As Jullien admits: *Mais c’est peut-être de la Grèce que je cherche le plus à m’approcher.* [But it is perhaps Greece that I seek to approach most].<sup>17</sup> Yet it is not only Greece, but also contemporary Europe or the West. Jullien often is explicit that he sees China as a heterotopy as the only place from where to extract any really helpful and really novel perspective; a perspective that so-called critical approaches from within European philosophy could not possibly come up with.
- IV. A fourth approach, finally, de-emphasizes all *comparata*, but emphasizes perhaps more greatly than any of the other approaches the comparer, i.e. at least in a specific sense. It is this approach that is often thought of as “decontextualizing”, but I think that this is a very misguided view, for the approach emphasizes the “context” of the comparer, more specifically, some debate or discourse in which the comparer is involved and to which she or he seeks to contribute. In the field of Chinese and comparative philosophy, Bo Mou and his method of a constructive engagement may be taken as representative of this approach. Tanner lists

<sup>14</sup> Hall and Ames, 1987, 7; David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 155; Hall and Ames 1998, xi; Roger T. Ames, “Indigenizing globalization and the hydraulics of culture: taking Chinese philosophy on its own terms” in *Globalizations* 1, no. 2 (2004): 175.

<sup>15</sup> François Jullien, *Détour et l’accès: Stratégies du sens en Chine, en Grèce*, Paris: Grasset, 1995, 8.

<sup>16</sup> My use of the notion of “pseudo-Foucauldian” requires justification. Although the term “heterotopy” is mentioned in only two of Foucault’s texts (Preface of *Les Mots et les Choses* and “Des Espaces Autres”) and notoriously ill-defined, Jullien’s reconfiguring of China as a heterotopy is departing from Foucault in important regards. First, Foucault is very clear that heterotopias are located within a society (his examples being rest homes, prisons, American motel rooms, fairgrounds, brothels, etc.), and not “elsewhere” in the sense in which Jullien invokes the term as also geographically elsewhere – if this is what he does. For it would still be possible that China in Jullien’s writings figures as a sort of discursive heterotopy in the manner perhaps suggested by Foucault’s discussion of Borges’ Chinese encyclopedia. But that would relegate China completely into the “imaginary realm” of a mirror image that has no connection to the China as a “real place”. So, Jullien’s options come down to either invoking China as a heterotopy as a real place that is not within the society to which it is the other or as a heterotopy that is a mirror (bordering on utopia) for the society to which it is the other but that is no longer a real place. Besides, many interpreters of Foucault understand the more extensive discussion of heterotopias in “Des Espaces Autres” as clarifying the question whether there might be also discursive heterotopias besides material heterotopias. In that essay, Foucault is explicit that heterotopias are “real places”. See: Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, xviii; Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” in *diacritics: a review of contemporary criticism* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27; Peter Johnson, “Unravelling Foucault’s ‘different spaces’” in *History of the Human Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2006): 75–90; Françoise Gaillard, “Du danger du penser” in Jean Allouch, Alain Badiou et al., *Oser construire: Pour François Jullien*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2007, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Jullien, 10.

Lisa Raphals as pursuing a “systematically philosophical” approach, but this is true I would hold only in a mild fashion.<sup>18</sup> For in a more radically pursued fashion, the *comparata* would be de-emphasized completely, meaning that their identity would no longer play an argumentative role beyond the demarcation of positions, which perhaps would render inappropriate any mention of this approach in terms of *comparative* philosophy.

These four approaches, I think, give a useful heuristics that is conceptually sound, but that of course does not entirely capture the approaches pursued in the field, which always manifest differences among each other that are differences in degree rather than in kind. Also, I do not insist that the scholars that I have just mentioned as exemplifying each of the approaches are the best possible choices. That would be important, too, but is not my current concern. Still, if you agree that the presented heuristics is conceptually sound and that there would be scholars coming close to representing one or the other approach, then it seems to me that you would also agree that the question whether these four approaches are to be understood as four approaches in a commonly shared task of comparative philosophy or four approaches approaching each something different is not easy to answer. I think that both cases could be argued successfully. What is important for the purposes of my argument, for my comparison of comparative approaches, is that it is not an absurd position to assume that very different purposes might be sustaining these different comparative approaches, even if viewed in terms of philosophy only. This might easily come to be forgotten when viewing the different approaches in comparative philosophy merely as variants available for pursuing Sino-Hellenic philosophy understood as united by some purpose in terms of inquiry.

Sino-Hellenic philosophy, as I have mentioned above, from the point of view of comparative philosophy at most constitutes one special case of two *comparata* picked from among innumerable other possible *comparata*, and, needless to say, they are a special case that easily could and in much work is presented in still more special terms. But the name Sino-Hellenic philosophy at the very least seems to demand that any work done in its name focuses on two or more *comparata* that can be grouped as either Sinic or Hellenic, with at least one *comparatum* being grouped under each. Although the name Sino-Hellenic philosophy apparently does not include any restriction in terms of period, it seems to be at least implicitly understood that there is such a restriction to the period of Greek and Chinese antiquity, and if Sino-Hellenic Studies are presented as a sub-field of Classics, as they are presented in Tanner’s review, then the restriction is verging on the explicit. Yet, on the other hand, Tanner includes Robert Wardy’s *Aristotle in China* in his survey, notably as an “approach in Sino-Hellenic comparative philosophy”, which is a study about an early seventeenth century translation into Chinese of a Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Categories*.<sup>19</sup>

I am not quite sure whether or not the name Sino-Hellenic philosophy and the way the sub-field is presented by Tanner would not preclude the second and third approaches – if carried to extremes – for lack of explicit interest in comparison of ancient Greece and China, because the second approach simply could be called Sinic

<sup>18</sup> Tanner, 2009, 95.

<sup>19</sup> Tanner, 2009, 99. See: Robert Wardy, *Aristotle in China: Language, Categories and Translation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.



philosophy (its aim being to get rid of Greek and other “Western” distorting concepts), whereas the third approach would reduce the mention of Sino, and its mention in the first position to a mockery (China merely being an instrument to deconstruct Greek and “European” philosophy). As regards the fourth approach, any exclusive restriction to a particular period and to two *comparata* as exclusively meaningful *comparata* would seem rather peculiar. Nonetheless, Tanner does include the fourth approach and also both Ames and Jullien in his discussion, which implies that for him their approaches somehow squarely fall within the scope of Sino-Hellenic philosophy. But perhaps, if anything, this is a consequence from approaching a comparison of comparative approaches from the viewpoint of Sino-Hellenic Studies as a sub-field of Classics. Ames admittedly pursues a comparative interest (Jullien perhaps less so) and is certainly working in *comparative* philosophy, yet it is in my view mistaken to think just because a text contains philosophical discussion drawing on ancient Greek and Chinese sources that it is therefore about *Sino-Hellenic* comparative philosophy.

Let me give an example to show that I am not merely splitting hairs. Tanner opens his discussion of Jullien writing that Jullien “uses the juxtaposition of Chinese with Greek philosophy to ‘open up a perspective’ which allows us to ‘question ourselves from the outside.’ Self-criticism within Western philosophy, Jullien argues, has taken place only within rather narrow parameters, largely set by the Greeks.”<sup>20</sup> And a bit later, he mentions that Jullien’s *Détour et l’Accès* is his most sustained “Sino-Hellenic comparison” – which is, inasmuch as it is true, surely true enough. But what thereby goes unnoticed is that Jullien’s work is not primarily about the Greeks, but depending on the topic that he is addressing also about, say, the Enlightenment.<sup>21</sup> In fact, with the exception of Lloyd and some few others who more consequently focus on Greek and Chinese antiquity only, much comparative philosophy will variously and without much ado be ready to exchange the ‘Hellenic’ for ‘Judeo-Christian’, ‘Enlightenment’, ‘European’, ‘Anglo-American’ or simply ‘Western’ – which, in turn, often serves to locate the source of a problem, of an essentialist Greek quest for certainty, of Judeo-Christian transcendence, of imperialistic Enlightenment rationality or subject-object dichotomy or of an unduly dissecting Anglo-American analytic style, or as it were of all of these lumped together as part of the West.

This brings up another issue, which is the almost pervasive inattentiveness shown towards a set of qualifications of the *comparata* smuggled into the comparison. Many texts – and this is true for the majority of scholars working in the field of Chinese and comparative philosophy – will employ several of the following terms in any combination to qualify what is meant by Chinese and Greek beyond the field-constitutive qualification that they relate to philosophy. Here are the terms: culture, civilization, society, tradition, worldview, mentality, way of thinking, way of life, nation, peoples, etc. Unfortunately, it is hardly ever argued how these notions hang together, and what benefit is expected from using them at all in a particularly chosen combination.

<sup>20</sup> Tanner, 2009, 97.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. François Jullien, *Fonder la morale: Dialogue de Mencius avec un philosophe des Lumières*, Paris: Grasset, 1995.



## Some Potential Pitfalls of Comparison

The first pitfall is one that may but need not be involved whenever there is talk of “culture”. It is the pitfall of undue generalization, often, but again not necessarily, by way of cultural essentialism. One of Lloyd’s methodological principles is the anti-generalization principle, which is precisely there to warn against this pitfall. Lloyd has also been working against undue generalization by repeating that “we have to raise similar questions concerning the differences between Greeks and Chinese, but also between different Greeks, and again among different Chinese thinkers.”<sup>22</sup> Ames has tried to get around essentialism by introducing a distinction between “cultural dominants” and recessive elements, although he has most recently spoken out as regards cultural generalization as being both necessary and desirable (against arguments to the contrary by Paul Goldin and Michael Puett).<sup>23</sup> With regard to Sino-Hellenic philosophy, by virtue of its name only, there seems to be a tension between the generalization that comes with the terms “Chinese” and “Greek” and the work that is done in its name, which in one way or another is always covering ground that does not allow for claims at the level of generality associated with these terms. An obvious way out would be simply to be more specific in framing one’s comparative study by acknowledging the institutional sub-field “Sino-Hellenic philosophy” as a marker, but raising one’s claims only with regards to the ground covered, speaking for example of Mencian-Aristotelian philosophy. This would bring about, I think, a more productive way of dealing with generalization, in which a comparative study of Mencius and Aristotle would always be an *example* of Sino-Hellenic philosophy as well as a subverting *exception* to it, destabilizing that which is sustaining the identity marker in terms of the content that has hitherto been ascertained in the identification. Needless to say that the notion of “Mencian-Aristotelian philosophy” faces the same tension again, although perhaps at another level, and one could always be more specific, moving down the levels of generality and ending at that kind of particularity which is then often called singularity – a concept that in my view either escapes language and thus becomes meaningless or may function as a kind of limit-concept (*Grenzbegriff*). So the problem is not that there is a tension; it could not be otherwise. And that can simply be acknowledged and be dealt with in one or another way. The problem is if it is dealt with by offering some sort of resolution of the tension, i.e. of what cannot be resolved if one is committed to keep operating within the limits of language. I would contest that the use of the term “culture” in much comparative philosophy often and precisely works to obscure the tension between the institutional marker, say, of “Sino-Hellenic philosophy” and the actually advanced comparative study. And this then is a pitfall of comparative philosophy, both to be avoided in one’s own work and to look out for in the work of others.

A second potential pitfall specifically concerns comparative frameworks such as the one of Sino-Hellenic Studies, in which it seems that part of the reason for comparison is a suggested contemporaneity of the involved *comparata*. It is thus that Lloyd can keep a distance over against Chinese and Greek “antiquity”. Besides

<sup>22</sup> Lloyd 2004, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Hall and Ames 1998, xvii; Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*, Hongkong: The Chinese University Press and Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011, 20ff.

more recent debates on multiple antiquities, which might help understand better the epistemic consequences of what we do when we refer to “Chinese and Greek antiquity”, the suggested contemporaneity often surreptitiously risks implying the application of a measuring rod in developmental and other terms. Strictly speaking, a comparison thus turns out not to be a comparison between two *comparata*, but a comparison between two *comparata* in a particular period. From there, it is a short way to ascertaining as the result of the comparison a relation in which one *comparatum* is yet lacking what the other boasts – for instance, showing, “to the less developed, the image of its own future” (Marx, *Capital*) – and where that is interpreted as a difference conclusively explained by a hegemonic model of development. The title of a review by Reg Little (about the same volume as Tanner’s review) puts it succinctly: “When Civilizations Compete” – although Little shows not much awareness at all for the political and philosophical question marks that such a framing of comparative philosophy immediately provokes.<sup>24</sup>

This is not to say that comparisons that abstain from suggesting contemporaneity are in any way safe from the pitfall; far from it, there is an entire body of scholarship that explicitly relies on non-contemporaneity and advances arguments that entirely rely on a developmental model. Think, for instance, of arguments about an ancient Chinese thinker in fact having been the first to advocate democracy or about that we can find a problem conventionally attributed to, say, Kant already in this or that Indian text. Of course, these might be arguments that are justified on some ground, for instance, as reactions against a continuing philosophical imperialism that fashions an exclusive and politically effective history of ideas in a self-mirroring image. But this does not do away with the fact that these arguments also rely on a common timeline and perhaps on a measuring rod in developmental and other terms.

A third potential pitfall that I want to mention has to do with what I call “the politics of comparative philosophy.” By this I mean the inevitable problematic that comparative philosophy, and this applies also to Sino-Hellenic philosophy, *mutatis mutandis*, is not operating in a political vacuum, but that there often is a political as well as other subtext.<sup>25</sup> Such a political approach to comparative philosophy has to be distinguished from that comparative philosophy that is *about* political questions. What I have in mind are the political agendas that motivate the comparisons, the reasons underlying the choice of some *comparata* and *tertia comparationis* and not others, and so on; and it matters little whether these agendas are pursued knowingly or unknowingly. In my view, what matters is that they be made explicit and subjected to a self-critical reflection. Why is it the case that today Sino-Hellenic Studies are upcoming and thriving? True, it might simply be a consequence of a more globally inclusive awareness that has eventually reached the Philosophy and Classics departments; and to that extent may indeed be desirable. But there is certainly more to it.

A close look at the above-mentioned authors once again proves instructive. Ames, in an earlier study with David Hall, registers that “comparative philosophy ... within the Western philosophical community has gained momentum.” But why is that so?

<sup>24</sup> Reg Little, “When Civilizations Compete: A Review of Steven Shankman & Stephen W. Durrant (eds), *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking Through Comparisons* (N.Y., State University of New York Press, 2002)”, in *The Culture Mandala* 6, no. 1 (2003), online.

<sup>25</sup> An insightful discussion of Classical Studies emphasizing political subtext is: Michael Lambert, *The Classics and South African Identities*, London: Duckworth Publishers, 2011.

Hall and Ames explain: “Partially, and this is true with respect to China in particular, it is a consequence of pragmatic pressures to interact with those cultures that have begun to emerge as economic and political powers.”<sup>26</sup> In his most recent monograph, Ames makes a similar point: “In this essay, I will argue that the long-postponed impact of Confucian values on different aspects of the world’s philosophical and cultural traditions is now on the horizon, and that a creative fusion of Confucianism with other narratives will follow behind the rise of China as a contemporary economic and political force.”<sup>27</sup> Jullien, in his most sustained “Sino-Hellenic comparison”, mentions that there are many reasons to be interested in China, one of them being the growing importance that China has in the world – although Jullien, to be fair, is clear that this is not his major reason.<sup>28</sup> Even Tanner, in his review, decides to end the piece with the following observations: “The encounter of Western cultures and societies with a rising China will be one of the most pressing issues for the humanities and social sciences in this new millennium. China, like the West, has its own Classical tradition, and the comparative exploration of the roots and character of these traditions ought to play an important role in this encounter. The rise of China and Chinese studies and the opening up of Classical studies offers a particularly favorable conjuncture for the development of comparisons of ancient Greece and early China in which each culture carries equal weight. There is every possibility that Sino-Hellenic studies will become one of the most stimulating disciplinary sub-fields within both Classics and Sinology.”<sup>29</sup> Note how Tanner in these four sentences not only uses the terms “traditions” and “culture” in a not-further-commented-upon combination, but also how he draws a line of continuity from Greece to the contemporary West. More importantly, he affirms my point that the so-called ‘rise of China’ is a recurring topos in discussions of Sino-Hellenic comparative philosophy. But, we may ask, does the acknowledgment of China’s rise explicate or support in any way the philosophical arguments that Tanner, or, for that matter, also Ames or Jullien, advance in terms of comparative philosophy? Of course it does not and, in my view, it also should not. But why then mention it at all? It is obviously no less important or less apposite to study African philosophy, notwithstanding that the ‘rise of Africa’ is not featuring in the headlines of the newspapers. But even if you think that there is good reason why the ‘rise of China’ should call for increased philosophical attention, it seems that you would then be hard pressed why Greece should figure in the comparison – although, admittedly, Greece these days sadly enough does abundantly feature in the headlines of newspapers around the globe.

It might be objected that I have just mistaken the Greece of 2012, the *Elliniki Dimokratia*, for the Greece of antiquity, the cradle of European civilization. And is Europe not an economic and political power today, according to many indicators much closer to China than to Africa? Is ‘Greece-meaning-Europe’ hence not

<sup>26</sup> Hall and Ames 1998, xi.

<sup>27</sup> Ames 2011, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Jullien 1995, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Tanner, 2009, 105.

rightfully part of the comparison, particularly in view of disciplinary philosophy and its continuing European hegemony? But, consider the basis of this line of argument. Does the objection not rely itself on a pre-supposed continuity between the contemporary People's Republic of China and the chaotic Warring States China of pre-imperial times that is – precisely – as questionable as the one between contemporary Greece and the Greece of antiquity? I believe that such continuity arguments in the majority of cases, if anything, constitute another pitfall of comparative philosophy. Needless to say, it is often 'culture' that is thought to sustain the continuity in question.

### Provincializing Sino-Hellenic Studies

To conclude, I would like to discuss further the possibilities and limitations of Sino-Hellenic Studies by taking up yet a different point of view, i.e. by provincializing "Sino-Hellenic Studies", by dislocating its institutional center to the People's Republic of China. In recent years, there have been various efforts to institutionalize something like "Sino-Hellenic Studies" in the PRC. The label under which some of these efforts have been carried out is the 'Study of Chinese and Western Classics' (*zhongxi gudian xue* 中西古典学), and Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫 (\*1956) has been a driving force behind it. Repeatedly, Liu has called out for the establishment of centers for the study of the ancient Greek classics in the PRC and for building up Chinese Classical Studies in its mirror image. Under his auspices, the Huaxia Publishing House has been running two series called *Classic & Interpretation*, one devoted to 'Western tradition' and one to 'Chinese tradition'. They are also publishing a journal by the same name devoted to both 'traditions'. What is more, Liu has recently proposed that Latin and Greek be promoted as electives in Chinese university curricula. May Liu Xiaofeng hence be understood as pursuing and advocating Sino-Hellenic Studies?

In a review of a volume by François Jullien together with a volume on Jullien in Chinese entitled *To Go Afar and to Return: Dialogue between Greece and China*, Thierry Meynard refers to Liu Xiaofeng as a kind of "Chinese Jullien." He writes: "As Jullien has learnt classical Chinese to read the ancient texts of China in order to enquire about Western modern thinking, Liu has learnt ancient Greek and Latin to read the ancient texts of the West in order to enquire about modern Chinese thinking."<sup>30</sup> So Liu might just be fitting my presented heuristics as pursuing the third approach in Sino-Hellenic Studies. There is a problem, however. Liu is not only advocating the study of Greek classics; he is also a fervent propagator of Sino-Christian theology and a self-confessed 'cultural Christian' (*wenhua Jidutu* 文化基督徒). This is to say that for Liu, the classical question 'Athens or Jerusalem?' is easily and readily

<sup>30</sup> Thierry Meynard, "Review of François Jullien, A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004, x + 202 pages and Du Xiaozhen 杜小真, *To Go Afar and Return: Dialogue between Greece and China* 遠去與歸來: 臘與中國的對話, Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 2004, 3 + 99 pages" in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2008): 219.

answered with an emphatic ‘Both, Athens and Jerusalem!’ Still, the question poses a challenge – on the crudest of terms – to any facile continuity argument from ancient Greece to today’s Europe – not because the continuity would be with Jerusalem rather than with Athens (as, for example, Habermas in some instances seems to suggest), but because focusing on one and ignoring the other exposes the grotesque claim of an argument based on either Athens or Jerusalem only.<sup>31</sup>

There is another problem with Liu’s approach to Sino-Hellenic Studies, inasmuch as this is his topic. For Meynard adds an interesting epiphraasis to the passage parallelizing Liu and Jullien, writing: “... of course, Liu’s approach is more political, while Jullien stays at a more intellectual level.”<sup>32</sup> These qualifications, of Liu’s approach as “political” and of Jullien’s approach as “intellectual”, will serve to sum up the main contentions of my paper. Meynard is surely right to allude to the political purposes that Liu brings to the study of Chinese and Western classics – although he could have been far more explicit. Liu is also well-known in the PRC for his role in introducing the thought of Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss. Not only does he embrace the Schmittian friend-foe understanding of politics and his critique of liberal democracy, but he also follows Leo Strauss (along Heinrich Meier’s reading in terms of political theology) as concerns the importance attributed to reading the Classics and the method of reading them.<sup>33</sup> Zhou Lian suggests that Chinese Straussians, by which he understands “Liu Xiaofeng and his followers”, like their fellow American Straussians “believe that, as members of a chosen few who know the truth, they also will be entitled to rule the world someday.”<sup>34</sup> The political purposes of Liu’s Sino-Hellenic Studies are hence quite obvious and, although Liu cannot be taken as somehow representing Chinese Sino-Hellenic Studies, his voice is surely influential, given that the Straussians have been considered “possibly the most popular, the most organized and the best-funded group of the past 10 years in mainland China.”<sup>35</sup> The contention that I am putting forward is this: Does all of that leave the comparisons and their outcomes untouched? Can we separate the subject-matter of the comparisons from the

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, “Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong?”, in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God and Modernity*, Boston: The MIT Press, 2002, 129–138; Jürgen Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken: Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988, 23: “So glaube ich nicht, dass wir als Europäer Begriffe wie Moralität und Sittlichkeit, Person und Individualität, Freiheit und Emanzipation – die uns vielleicht noch näher am Herzen liegen als der um die kathartische Anschauung von Ideen kreisende Begriffsschatz des platonischen Ordnungsdenkens – ernstlich verstehen können, ohne uns die Substanz des heilsgeschichtlichen Denkens jüdisch-christlicher Herkunft anzueignen.” [engl.: *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, Boston: The MIT Press, 1994, 15: “I do not believe that we, Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, person individuality, or freedom and emancipation, without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in terms of salvation. And these concepts are, perhaps, nearer to our hearts than the conceptual resources of Platonic thought, centring on order and revolving around the cathartic intuition of ideas.”]

<sup>32</sup> Meynard 2008, 219.

<sup>33</sup> Zhou Lian, “The Most Fashionable and the Most Recent: A Review of Contemporary Chinese Political Philosophy” in *Diogenes* 56, no. 221 (2009): 129–131.

<sup>34</sup> Zhou 2009, 130.

<sup>35</sup> Zhou 2009, 129.

political purposes that motivate them? And, even if we can, are we well-advised to do so?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> To be sure, the contention seems timely. Those identifying with the new and upcoming sub-field of Sino-Hellenic Studies are challenged to find appropriate answers as personal and institutional contacts between the two provinces of learning continue to intensify. That the process of engaging the problematique is well under way is demonstrated by an international conference on the topic of "The Western Classics in Modern China", organized by the University of Chicago Center in Beijing and held there in April 2012. That the contention has been recognized is evident from a panel to be held at the 145th Annual Meeting of the American Philological Association in 2013. The panel, co-organized by Shadi Bartsch and Walter Scheidel, is entitled "Classics and Reaction: Modern China Confronts the Ancient West". In the synopsis of the panel, Liu Xiaofeng is explicitly mentioned as a "controversial Chinese scholar" and a series of important questions are raised, among which feature the following two: "Why has Straussian interpretation developed such a high profile? What is the connection between the Western classics and the resurgence in Chinese?"

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